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ABSTRACT

The tension between competition and cooperation within the various sectors of higher education are considered by the president of the American Council on Education. In American society, the tension is between the pursuit of individual goals and commitment to the collective good. In higher education, competition for high achieving, traditional-age students is expensive and may cut into academic quality or the ability of the college to attract and aid the neediest students. Rather than multiple models of excellence that reflect pluralistic educational goals, many four-year colleges have embraced a single model of excellence, that of the research university. The single model of excellence promotes conflict among institutions, particularly in the public sector where the regional state universities try to emulate the flagship institutions in the hope of improving their share of state funding. Additional concerns are: the assumption that good universities offer big-time athletics; increased tension between public and private institutions; competition to obtain federal appropriations; and the fact that most leaders are white males who have emerged from the faculty ranks. The need for member institutions of the American Council on Education to renew commitment to collaboration is discussed. (SW)

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# COMPETITION and the COMMONWEAL

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*Remarks delivered*
*at the ACE Annual Meeting*
*San Francisco, California*

October 7, 1986

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# COMPETITION and the COMMONWEAL

Higher education right now is under fire from without and under strain within. Our purpose today in calling this meeting is to engage you, ACE members and constituents, in the important work of building an agenda for the council and for higher education. The charge of a broad-based membership organization is ambiguous, if not paradoxical. It is both active, providing leadership, and reactive, reflecting our members' concerns. These stances produce an ongoing dialectic of speaking and listening, pushing and pulling, leading and following. Today, I hope to begin a process that will expand the dialogue between you, our institutional leaders, so as to develop a mandate for our collective future.

My comments today are in keeping with the spirit of this annual meeting, which invites you to examine some current American social realities and speculate about the future we face. While I hope many will agree with what I have to say, I feel compelled to state that these views are my own, and do not necessarily represent those of the board of ACE.

I would like to offer reflections on the current tension between competition and cooperation within the various sectors of higher education. For we will pay if it goes too far. America's history has shown competition to be healthy, but it has also shown that too much competition can be destructive. I believe it is necessary to rein in the more unproductive forces of competition, which are on the verge of going out of control. At the moment, the failure to exercise restraint will weaken our public policy credibility and will invite further unwelcome and intrusive regulatory actions by government. Strengthening the commonweal is not simply a noble idea, though nobility should surely justify it. It is an imperative for higher education if we are to be a social force in this nation rather than mere vendors of educational services.

The choices we face today are rooted in a fundamental tension in American society that is a source of strength to our nation but at the

same time imperils our collective welfare. The tension is between the pursuit of individual goals and commitment to the collective good. In a concrete way, it is expressed as competition among organizations, groups, and industries, as opposed to cooperation to achieve larger, shared goals.

Surely, this country would not be the great and rich democracy that it is without its traditions of individualism and free enterprise. But neither society as a whole, nor higher education is best served by the unregulated pursuit of self-interest. I am dismayed by the now-popular notion that obedience to market forces is the best approach to public policy, economic life, or individual transactions. I am frightened by the growing public acceptance of the idea that these market forces will somehow sort things out and that the most economically and socially fit will survive.

Pulling against these competitive forces is the reality that we live in an increasingly global village where we must work together to reduce conflict and to see to the equitable distribution of resources. Redressing the balance between the individual and the larger society, between nationalism and the global village, between competition and cooperation, between the pursuit of our own self-interest and our responsibilities to others should be major agenda items for American society and for higher education as well in the late 20th century. For I fear that if we do not attend to these values we will undo much of the progress we have made in the last 200 years toward fulfilling the American dream.

America was born in a spirit of revolution and rebellion, and the pursuit of individual freedom has had an illustrious history in this nation. We have leaned toward individualism, competition, and free enterprise. Beginning with the New Deal and extending essentially until the beginning of the Reagan Presidency, the U.S. took modest and halting steps in the direction of the cooperative or egalitarian approach. We are at a crossroads today.

The subject of individualism and the commonweal has taken on a new urgency for all of us as citizens and educators. We have a great deal at stake and the American people continue to be ambivalent about this issue. There are both encouraging and dangerous signs on the horizon.

The current Administration, reflecting in part, but not entirely, the mood of the American people, has made its position clear. It

has rejected the social welfare experiments of the previous 50 years, turning us back toward what it believes is our historic free enterprise heritage in which the role of the government is limited to national defense and to the delivery of the mail. The Administration believes that the untrammeled pursuit of self-interest will give us more economic growth and a generally more productive society than would result from a more activist government.

The policies of this Administration have clearly reflected a diminished commitment to investing in the overall social good—through education, through attention to the growing underclass in American society, and through other social programs designed to help those who, for whatever reason, have been deprived of their share of the bountiful American pie. As a result, during the first four years of the Reagan Administration, the richest one-fifth of our families gained 25 billion dollars in disposable income, and the poorest one-fifth lost seven billion dollars. Any society that concentrates 30 percent of the wealth in less than 5 percent of the population must seriously examine its definition of fairness.

The pursuit of self-interest will inevitably widen the gap between rich and poor, the educated and the uneducated, the powerful and the disenfranchised. A recent article in *The New York Times* pointed out that the growing polarization of our society and the rapid expansion of the underclass creates its own dynamic: the haves do what they can to avoid contact with the have-nots. The haves do not use public schools, parks, or mass transit, and thus they do not support expenditures for these services. As author Barbara Ehrenreich says, "If you send your children to private school, commute to work by taxi, and find your clean air at Aspen, you are likely to prefer a tax cut to the expansion of government services."

By defining the common good as national defense, this Administration has rationalized abandoning the individual and has chosen guns over butter. Reducing the federal deficit has become a smokescreen. The Administration helped to create the present deficit by vast increases in defense spending, coupled with an excessive 1981 tax cut. It has now proposed to solve the problem it helped to create by massive cuts in discretionary domestic spending. Discretionary domestic spending, only a small part of which is for education, did not cause the budget problem. It has been a declining share of

federal spending for years, yet this Administration proposes to balance the budget with that 17 percent of expenditures. Fortunately, the Congress does not agree. It is generally accepted on both sides of the political aisle that this budget problem will be solved by a combination of moderating growth in defense spending, moderating growth in entitlements, and levying a tax increase.

The Administration's ideology and its budgetary priorities have made education a rhetorical bonanza but a low priority. The Congress, believing that the Administration has misread the American people, has saved the federal role in education from destruction, but there has been steady erosion. The result is not only a lesser federal role, but a misplaced notion that education is simply a transaction between an institution and somebody called a consumer. Yet, our heritage reflects the very strong conviction that society benefits in countless ways from an educated citizenry.

There is much that is great about the American higher education system. No other country provides so many opportunities for so many to learn. The diversity of our system makes it a rich resource not only to students but to the entire nation. But we urgently need to get our own house in order, to sort out our struggle with the conflicting values of competition and the commonweal. Higher education is not immune to self-interest or less than lofty behavior. The world of scarcity in which we find ourselves has clearly driven us too far in the direction of unhealthy competition. Students are scarce for many institutions because of inexorable demographic trends. The faculty, staff, and facilities remain static in size and are aging. A dwindling of financial resources has aggravated the problem and brought institutional self-interest, if not survival, to the forefront.

And these pressures have driven some institutions to behaviors that are not only unbecoming to our mission, but which ultimately will weaken the entire higher education enterprise. Let me cite a few examples.

- The competition for high-achieving, traditional-age students has become unseemly. Recruiting has become expensive and flashy. The cost of attracting students continues to escalate and every dollar spent on recruiting reduces what can be spent on instruction. These days, recruiting has taken a new twist as we compete

with each other for the better student with lures of financial aid. I believe that there is nothing wrong with wooing good students by offering financial aid on a basis other than need, but when the bidding war becomes so expensive that it cuts into academic quality or into the ability of institutions to attract and aid the neediest students, it has gone too far.

- Competition has also obscured our vision of purpose and misguided many four-year institutions to embrace a single model of excellence—that of the research university. It is understandable that we would have this as an ideal since most faculty members attended such institutions where their graduate school mentors were the research-oriented and highly published barons of their field. When these faculty members find themselves in what should be a teaching institution, they often behave as though it were a research university, in part because they are trained to do so, and in part because they are rewarded for doing so. All too often, the incentive and reward system in teaching institutions looks suspiciously like that of research universities. Responsibility for this problem resides as well with the academic administrators, chancellors, and presidents who too often embrace the single model of excellence and enter the bidding wars for superstar professors, who reward research more than teaching, and who initiate graduate programs despite the surplus of Ph.D.s in most fields. I am by no means arguing that undergraduate teaching institutions should not engage in graduate and professional education, but rather that we need multiple models of excellence that reflect pluralistic educational goals and social demands.

- The single model of excellence promotes internecine warfare among institutions, particularly in the public sector where the regional state universities try to emulate the flagship institutions in the hope of improving their share of state funding. While institutional leaders have resented externally-imposed efforts to distribute programs and centers of excellence around state systems, the logic is compelling that not all institutions can excel in all areas. We must recognize this and act voluntarily to target our institutional efforts and resources. Control of the free market will enable undergraduate state institutions to truly excel in undergraduate instruction, for that is simply not the forte of research

universities. To a lesser extent, the single model of excellence problem is found in some community colleges which look to the four-year institutions for their models of excellence just as the regionals look to the research universities.

- More pernicious fallout from the single model of competition is found in athletics. There is an assumption that good universities offer big-time athletics. Thus to be a "real university," an institution must offer Division One sports. Rather than orienting athletics to maximizing student participation in intramural and club sports, institutions striving for this single model invariably seek the holy grail of athletic prominence. A president or governing board usually sends strong messages to that effect to coaches whose jobs depend on producing what the bosses want.

- Some problems associated with competition haunt us over time. The tension between public and private institutions is not a new issue, but it has worsened in recent years. Private institutions are now heavily dependent on federal financial aid funds and are increasingly aggressive in obtaining state dollars. Hard-pressed state institutions resent this, especially the increasing access of private institutions to the state treasuries. The resultant escalation of conflict has caused considerable bitterness in many states. That bitterness is aggravated by the increasing success of public institutions in private fund-raising, formerly the exclusive domain of independent institutions.

- Competition has escalated the war among institutions of all kinds to obtain earmarked federal appropriations. Partly to blame is the fact that for many years, there have been too few federal programs with too few dollars to support physical facilities and equipment. The success of a few institutions, often assisted by very high-priced Washington lobbyists, has encouraged others to compete individually. This has buttressed the growing conviction on the part of the "have-not" but aspiring institutions that their potential for greatness—as determined by the single model of excellence—is being systematically thwarted by the peer review systems for distributing federal science funds. The allegation against the peer review system, which is dominated by the faculty of research institutions, is that it is not a merit review

but simply a closed club, whose members come from 100 research universities, and who hand out money to each other. Those institutional leaders that believe that their campuses cannot successfully compete in that arena not surprisingly are tempted to seek legislative redress.

- Finally, our notions about leadership have fallen prey to the single model of excellence. It is no accident that the majority of our leaders have the same profile: white males who have emerged from the faculty ranks. Surely, that is only *one* model of leadership. Women, minorities, individuals with non-traditional credentials are still seen as *different*, as *other* in a system that has defined the norm by a subset of its people. Leadership in higher education must reflect its current and growing diversity, its staggering complexity. The single model no longer serves us well.

Where does all this lead us? We educators excel in stating and restating the problem. Practical solutions are harder to come by. It would be premature and presumptuous to end today with a series of proposed solutions, but it is certainly not presumptuous to begin the process of formulating them. And as ACE members you have choices to make about the role ACE plays in renewing higher education's commitment to collaboration for the common good.

Earlier, I referred to the paradoxical nature of ACE—as an organization of leaders and followers, speakers and listeners. It also serves as a two-way conduit, both representing the interests of our constituents to government officials and communicating to institutional leaders the concerns of those who make public policy. On the one hand, we work to fulfill your expectations of keeping federal dollars flowing with a minimum of regulatory intrusion, of defending self-regulatory mechanisms in accreditation or in athletics. On the other hand, we have an obligation to inform you on campuses of the concerns of those public policy makers about how the higher education enterprise is managing itself. The depth of their concerns and some of the proposals they set forth indicate that Congress—and the voters—believe that competition has gotten out of hand. The Higher Education Act Reauthorization contains a number of provisions that signal a public loss of confidence in our

ability to police ourselves. For example:

- There will be a national commission on family responsibility for financing postsecondary education, reflecting the belief of some members of Congress that too many families that are able to pay for their children's education are not doing so and that the present financial aid system offers no positive incentives for saving for college.
- The reauthorization proposes that students receiving federal aid must have a C average or an institutionally-determined standard of satisfactory progress. While not a particularly intrusive provision, this does reflect the belief on the part of some of our friends that our progress standards are inadequate.
- Institutions receiving federal financial aid will have to certify that they have a viable drug abuse program.
- The Secretary of Education will be required to conduct a study of the escalating cost of higher education and to recommend legislation, thus raising the specter of government measures for cost containment in our institutions.
- A joint study commission on accreditation will be created, which is a clear statement that voluntary accreditation—our most important self-regulatory instrument—is not satisfactorily addressing minimum standards or educational outcomes.
- A drug bill which passed the House calls for a politically appointed national commission to look at abuses in intercollegiate athletics.

The time is past when ACE can simply bring the earnest message from our members to the public, to government officials, and to lawmakers: "Trust us." Things have simply gone too far, our house is too conspicuously in disorder. That message will have to be accompanied by evidence that we are grappling with issues of containing our prices, measuring our outcomes, and assessing and ensuring the quality of our institutions.

And that brings me to a second aspect of the ACE dichotomy. ACE is both the voice of the diversity of our constituents and an

organization that provides leadership for its constituents. We have difficult tasks ahead, positions and actions to take that do not lend themselves to easy consensus among our very diverse membership. Thus, for ACE to represent all the interests of higher education while developing equitable and meaningful solutions is our great challenge. Few policies or strategies can satisfy everyone; satisfying the common denominator produces solutions at such a level of generality and banality as to be meaningless. Yet practical solutions with teeth are bound to alienate some constituents. So we found when ACE presidents meet to work on the problem of collegiate athletics. The outcomes of that process clearly made some of our members angry. Yet the strategies you embrace to strengthen the commonweal raise the fundamental question of your expectations of ACE and of yourselves as citizens of the higher education community.

ACE is the only national forum that brings together presidents and chancellors from all segments of higher education. As such, it is uniquely suited to the task of devising cooperative solutions to strengthen the commonweal. But the question that I put before you today is whether you have the will to confront the tough issues and the commitment to sacrifice individual institutional interests, or the interests of the various segments of higher education, in order to forge a new agenda. It is now up to you, the ACE members, to decide if you will mobilize and take action, with all the attendant risks, or if you will continue our current course of fragmentation and avoidance. You can expect ACE to work toward building the consensus which is so essential on so many issues, but I hope that you will also expect us to take risks, step on a few toes, and prod this wonderfully diverse community to become even better.